



HAL
open science

Resistance to work in post-taylorian organisations

Olivier Cousin

► **To cite this version:**

| Olivier Cousin. Resistance to work in post-taylorian organisations. 2008. halshs-00230234

HAL Id: halshs-00230234

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00230234>

Preprint submitted on 31 Jan 2008

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Olivier Cousin
 CADIS/CNRS
 EHESS/Université Victor Segalen Bordeaux 2

ISA RC 47 « Social classes and social movements »

« Globalisation, conflicts and the experience of localities »

*Rome 28-29 June 2007
 University of Rome « La sapienza »*

Resistance to work in post-Taylorian organisations.

The globalisation of economy, understood in the strict meaning of the term as financial deregulation, and the expansion of the new model of production, conventionally known as post-Fordism, allow us an insight into – perhaps not the disappearance of actors and all forms of action, at least the elimination and an abeyance of modes of resistance and protest. Globalisation sanctions the market and, as Alain Touraine suggests,¹ it generates a separation between economy and society, thus rendering the resurgence of the actor unlikely. Post-Taylorism has spread to all sectors of activity in the name of survival of firms, competition, efficiency and the interest of the wage-earners. However, numerous studies note the constraining nature of the new forms of organisation of work which are, to a large extent, based on the mobilising of subjectivity and an appeal to self-abnegation through the exaltation of competition and success.² In attempts to account for the apathetic nature of wage-earners, there are sometimes allusions to fear, or to a new state of alienation. In the first case, unemployment and the uncertainty of careers are said to be a partial explanation of the overcautiousness of wage-earners who, for lack of the slightest assurance as to the length of duration of their situation are unwilling to take the risk of launching into protest actions. In

¹ A. Touraine, 2005, *Un nouveau paradigme*, Paris, Fayard.

² Amongst the most recent analyses we find, L. Boltanski, E. Chiapello, 1999, *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard ; Y. Clot, 1998, *Le Travail sans l'homme*, Paris, La Découverte ; C. Dejours, 1998, *Souffrances en France*, Paris, Le Seuil ; J P. Durand, 2004, *La Chaîne invisible*, Paris, Le Seuil ; V. de Gaulejac 2005, *La Société malade de sa gestion*, Paris, Le Seuil ; R. Sennett, 2000, *Le travail sans qualité*, Paris, Albin Michel.

the second case, it is to a large extent the managerial rhetoric which, by appealing to their initiative, creativity and autonomy, is said to succeed in mobilising the actors and in concealing the constraints which weigh on them. In this case, it is almost impossible for them to express themselves as they become themselves the perpetrators of their own incapacity to see. This situation which is very briefly and superficially described here would also appear to apply to wage-earners as a whole.

In this context, how can we grasp the forms of resistance, or even of opposition of wage-earners, since they seem, *a priori*, very weak and very discreet? What status can be assigned to them when their scope seems extremely restricted and has difficulty in making an impact on the productive model and when the latter, on the contrary, is constantly extending to become the reference point of practically all firms, be they private or public, industrial or services? On the basis of research carried out over a period of almost 18 months in a large firm in the metallurgical sector and focussed mainly on an approach to the work of the managers, a few elements in answer can be outlined, mainly by distinguishing between four types of action. Each will be briefly described and illustrated on the basis of the presentation of a few cases, endeavouring in each instance to question their nature.

CONFRONTING INCOHERENCIES

The study and observation over 18 months of the working situation in a major firm – almost 10,000 employees in 2003, 21% of whom were managers and 41% technicians – led us to formulate the following hypothesis : it is not so much the employees who mobilise against the organisation of the work as the way in which the latter by the incoherencies which it generates provides openings which act as the breeding ground for the opposition of the actors. In other words, the employees may in many respects appear to be apathetic because they adhere, in theory, to the major principles and guidelines presented by the organisation of work. As, for example, surveys on modes of remuneration demonstrate³, managers tend to favour the individualisation of their remuneration and opt overwhelmingly for rewards on the basis of merit. However, and we shall come back to this, as this system does not succeed in responding to the expectations which it arouses, the result is that the actors rise up against it.

³ APEC, 2001, *Enquête cadrescope* ; CFTD, 2002, *Travail en question : Cadres* ; A. Karvar, L. Rouban (Ed.), 2004, *Les Cadres au travail*, Paris, La Découverte.

Therefore, in more general terms, there is no major and obvious challenge of the production model, however as there is a constant gap between the reality and the principles set out in the handbooks and the speeches, the employees are confused, very dissatisfied and thus develop multiple strategies which enable them to express their opposition. Thus, to successfully grasp the different modes of resistance and understand their nature, one has to begin by evaluating the incoherencies of the firm. These incoherencies are not due to missed opportunities or technicalities but are mainly the outcome of the incompatibility of the various rationales which underlie the firm, the decisions or the issues at stake. To take only one example, the firm is involved in something akin to a permanent Brownian motion, a form of agitation leading it ceaselessly to conduct experiments, launch projects, reforms or changes. Inevitably the latter are sometimes superimposed and in most cases become mixed up. The firm is not in an impasse but it simply presents itself as coherent, smooth-running and rational, this being based on a perfectly rehearsed managerial discourse, whereas in reality it is chaotic and uncertain. The employees experience and resent this situation from which they suffer but from which they also profit.

The organisational chaos forces the actors into a permanent task of adaptation and interpretation. Despite management by targets, despite the obligation to achieve results, which are two very real constraints, the work of the managers is not really set out in advance in that it requires an effort of interpretation. Their activity consists in constructing their own work since they manage an organisation which is opaque and lacks focus rather than resolving technical problems. It is this task of accommodation,⁴ that is, of pragmatic adaptation operated by the actors in the light of the situation which they encounter, which provides opportunities and enables expressions of “exit”, opposition or protest to emerge. Naturally, incoherence does not systematically and mechanically imply resistance and, in any case, this situation should not be interpreted uniquely from the angle of the opportunities which it affords. It also engenders stress and an increase in the difficulties and uncertainty.⁵ The managers complain about it and also experience it as a hindrance to their work and a destabilising element forcing them to commit themselves ever further for an outcome which is far from certain. The incoherence of the organisation is therefore profoundly ambivalent, because there are two aspects to it between which the managers cannot choose. They have to go along with them.

⁴ A. Barrère, 2002, *Les Enseignants au travail*, Paris, l’Harmattan.

⁵ D. Courpasson, 2000, *L’Action contrainte*, Paris, PUF.

FOUR FORMS OF ACTION

A simple double entry table enables a synthesis of the four forms of resistance which were observed during this research. These different types are based on two principles: the nature of the actor – individual/collective – and the nature of the action – withdrawal/challenge – leading to the following table.

	Individual actions	Collective actions
Exit	<i>Absorbing the shock</i>	<i>Preserving one's space</i>
Challenge	<i>Making one's voice heard</i>	<i>Hindering implementation</i>

The rationale of absorbing the shock

The first form to be observed is somewhat low level. It is part of an individual strategy in which the actors attempt to exit ; they retire from the game for varying lengths of time and in this way endeavour to protect themselves from the rationale of the system. This mode acts as a way of absorbing the shock. The actors do not appear to be particularly vehement or anti-authority, on the contrary they exit, usually only partially. As A. O. Hirschman has demonstrated,⁶ this strategy is the outcome of a lack of satisfaction on the part of the actors who, unhappy with a situation but knowing that they cannot act, prefer to exit. This strategy is a way of marking a pause, of exiting momentarily from the competition. The actors may pretend, or endeavour mainly to protect themselves. In both cases, this form of action is discreet and cannot give rise to a great deal of publicity since the actors put themselves in a delicate, and sometimes extreme, position.

In the context of work, one of the most frequent and most ordinary modes is observed almost every day when the employees do something quite different from working. Taking time off, walking about and chatting take over in offices and on the work floor. On the production line, the management and the line managers are constantly remarking, in relation to what they refer to as the specifics – or those for whom it is possible to make a direct relation between time worked and productivity – that there is a gap between the real time and the time declared. This gap also exists in the offices, where the managers, just like the others, also do something other than work and use their machines for other ends. The story goes that

⁶ A. O. Hirschman, 1995, *Défection et prise de parole*, Paris, Fayard.

one higher grade manager, a member of a school parents' association, prepared the staff meetings and board of governors meetings at the office, entering the pupils' marks on his computer and thus working out the averages of the classes. This does not take long but nevertheless occurs every term and is effectively a form of misappropriation without there being any desire to express a message about the organisation of work.⁷ This rationale brings to mind all the forms of behaviour developed by workers, but not uniquely by them, to slow down the rate of production and thus gain a little time or control over time.

Under this heading, there are also other modalities which, on the contrary, are the mirror image of the constraints and contradictions experienced by the administrators. In the first instance, a woman working in human resources uses the aims as a means of protecting herself and of avoiding being submerged by the urgency of the activity. The aims become a resource: "It enables me to rank the actions and to prioritise some in relation to others. That gives me some leeway in respect of all the requests." In the name of the aims to be achieved, it is possible to resist demands and to escape, in part at least, the flows of activity. Here, the actors take refuge behind the rules, the regulations and the procedures and, in defending them, carve out spaces for protection. Another approach, which is also very frequent, consists not in formally resisting but in re-adapting the workload in function of the constraints. The managers, being unable to refuse a project or a mission or, yet again, changes in the schedule or in the workload, adjust their own work and their investment as well as that of their team when they have people working under their responsibility. In these cases, very frequently they refer to impasse situations, to twisting the rules and sometimes even recognise that they are cheating. This situation is particularly frequent in the world of information technology when managers make veiled declarations to the effect that they skip some of the tests initially scheduled to compensate for the constraints of time or of budget. They cheat, often unwillingly, in so far as they will not do everything they should do. This situation is not so easy to come to terms with and is not as easily assumed as in the previous case in so far as it falls within the province of a constraint which goes against the idea of a job well done and more generally of professional ethics. However, this is also a form of resistance enabling an offsetting of the incoherencies of the organisation of work which, on one hand, constantly increases the procedures and, on the other, demands that the work be done in time limits which are shorter and shorter. In these cases, the managers perceived the procedures as

⁷ At Christmas time purchases by Internet using the office computers are also very frequent.

constraints which they endeavour to get round, but also sometimes as resources which they use to protect themselves and to do correctly what they consider has to be done.

The distinctive feature of this first form of action is to remain discreet, even hidden; it does not explicitly address a real or an institutional interlocutor. The managers react to a situation, in which the prime issue at stake is to work out spaces for exit, to construct shock absorbers rather than to express their disagreement. This behaviour can be seen as one of resignation or more simply as one of strategic adaptation. It probably contains elements of both.

The rationale of making one's voice heard

Another aspect of individual action is to attempt to make one's voice heard. This is also a classical action which assumes multiple forms depending on the location, the actors and the situation. It is omnipresent in its original form and manifests itself constantly during the multiple interactions in which the actors are involved. Opinions are voiced in every conversation each time people meet and are the subject of all formal and informal discussions. There is no end to them. In their first version they resemble a perpetual complaint which goes on and on with the actors relating or demonstrating the incoherencies in the organisation of the work. While so doing, they constantly oppose real work to the work set out, the ideal sort of work being contrasted with what they experience and actually do.⁸ The management by its aims is particularly targeted in these remarks. The managers do not so much criticise the principle as voice their regrets over the gap, which is sometimes considerable, between what they should do and what they do in reality. "In individual interviews, as well as in the job description", explained an assistant line manager, "it does not say you have to 'oil the machine and deal with unknown factors', and that's what takes 80% of the time." All interviews and all conversations at some point or another refer to this with the employees relating or complaining about what they experience as poor organisation, in which their work is at odds, sometimes completely, with what they are supposed to be doing. From this point of view, the management, through its aims, introduces new forms of constraint and changes the nature of the work, by an increase in what is prescribed; it is also the focus of endless criticism. The description of the aims to be achieved, during interviews, is inevitably accompanied by a criticism of the job and of its organisation, since the managers are

⁸ A. M. Dujarier, 2006, *L'Idéal au travail*, Paris, PUF.

constantly observing either the incompatibility between the different aims, or the overload which they represent since they are always in addition to the '80%' of the time taken up by everyday activities.

The second form of resistance is constructed on this basis. Making one's voice heard does not consist uniquely in expressing one's discontent. For the managers, it is a question of endeavouring to have an impact on the situation, of expressing their point of view and their expertise to reach a readjustment and a new equilibrium between the work prescribed and the real work done. For the managers, the individual interviews are the first locus of expression of this. If the aims, conceived of as the materialisation of the outlines of the politics and strategy of a firm are, as such, non-negotiable, they do however become so when they assume a material form, when they become deadlines, reports to be delivered, calculations to be produced or pieces to be finished. The room for manoeuvre is often very restricted but nevertheless almost always exists if only because it affords an opportunity to express their point of view and to give an account of their conditions of work.

But such individual interviews and listing of aims only constitute a brief moment in the organisation of work. In reality, given the rationale of 'just-in-time' methods, aims are constantly revised and revisable in function of unknown factors and fluctuations. Once again, this represents for the managers a source of both constraint and of action, for these revisions are experienced as both potential overloads and points at which it is possible to disagree and to make one's opinion known. Very frequently, the actors express themselves and attempt to voice their opinion by appealing to the initial aims. They have the power, as one of them said, "to be difficult": for example, in the context of quality control, one department may contact another service to carry out measurements using an industrial endoscope. Normally this latter would not work for the other department but it is the only one with a technician competent to do this type of inspection. As a result, when the workload permits, its technician will lend a hand to the other departments, the risk being that occasional help will become a routine procedure. On another occasion, esteeming that the service was not able to lend a hand, the unit's manager refused. "Last week I didn't go along with it. So this is a typical instance of where I can say no; so, yes, I do sometimes have the possibility of 'being awkward'". In many such cases those refusing or expressing an opinion will do so invoking their expertise, or the command of a specific know-how or competencies. The managers thus appeal to a different rationale and consider that they are perfectly entitled to do so when they are dealing with norms of quality, procedures or a code of ethics. They consider they should and must bring

into play their right to warn⁹ when the deadlines become incompatible with the order or more simply when they perceive risks, as one of the managers of the technical division explained. “We (the firm) have been sold as being capable to carry out this project. If we can’t, there are financial risks and also a risk for the reputation of the firm. We are at the limits of what we know how to do, so we are all heads-down for the whole thing to work... At our level, we have always said whether or not we can achieve our aims. Our role has been to tell our superiors what the risks were. We have been given an aim and, the first time, we said it could not be achieved in the time allocated. The first reactions of our superiors is to tell us that we have always managed to do it and we have to think hard about how to do it. But after that, our role is to give the objective factors to tell them a second time, or even a third time, that there are risks and that we have to take action to cover these risks. Usually, the management ends up by getting the message that there are risks involved.”

Apart from the public nature of this mode of action, compared to the private and more discreet mode of the shock absorber rationale, what distinguishes the one from the other is the uncertainty of the second. Voicing an opinion, the public expression of disagreement and the attempt to challenge or to be heard are not rare or isolated acts. However, they are subject to considerable uncertainty because nobody, whatever their position in the firm, knows what will become of their opinion, particularly as it very rarely succeeds in being addressed directly to those who have decision-making powers. In the first scenario, we are dealing with a rationale which consists in saying nothing but also in doing nothing. This type of action enables the partial recovery of tiny fragments of autonomy, of confronting pressures and of temporarily exiting from the game. In the second scenario, the rationale consists in endeavouring not to do it while stating this intention. This strategy is obviously more random, less because the candidates are liable to sanctions than because there is no certainty as to the scope of their action.

Preserving one’s space

To describe the next two types of manifestation as collective actions is not entirely correct. In no case are they a form of collective mobilisation where the actors come together

⁹ « Whistleblowing » is a concept which signifies a signal of alarm and has given rise to the « Whistleblower Protection Act » in the United-States. Cf, C. Didier, 2004, « Code de déontologie et droit d’opposition », in A. Karvar, L. Rouban, (Eds., *op. cit.*)

to challenge or oppose, in one way or another, decisions or working conditions. However, while these actions may, *a priori*, belong to the domain of individual involvement, they take place in the name of a perception of the workforce as a collective. In the first instance, what is sought is not so much a strategy of exit or protection as one of desire to preserve a space which corresponds to the world with which the actors identify: a department, a management or a site.

The firm, on the basis of which the observations concerning the managers' modes of action were made, is characterised by the superimposition of layers which do not exactly fit into each other. Located mainly on three sites which are several kilometres distant from each other, it also has several major managements, each of which includes several sub-divisions which are further divided into departments. In addition to this pyramid structure, there are networks, such as human resources, which bring together several actors belonging to different entities. Finally, there are also groups based on skills and projects. In short, the image one has is of a universe inhabited by structures which sometimes have very strong traditions of autonomy and between which a considerable degree of rivalry is maintained. While, in relation to the company, the attachment to the firm is important, this bond is nevertheless superseded by the attachment to a site or a department. It is in this context that practices which do not formally have the intention of assuming a collective nature, but which take place in the name of a collective, can be understood. In many cases the issue is one of preserving, maintaining, and even perhaps extending one's space of reference, of campaigning against a management, a department or a network which, on the contrary, is attempting to interfere in one's original space.

The observable actions are never proclaimed as such. Like the 'shock absorbers' they remain discreet and can not easily be expressed publicly for, in many cases, they resemble 'go-slow' actions in that they represent means of resisting the gaze or the interference of other departments or services or, more simply, of preserving one's autonomy. In the eyes of the company, or other entities, they appear as anomalies as incoherencies or missed opportunities which should be eliminated or as a manifestation of resistance to change. This interpretation brings discredit to these practices, depriving them of any capacity of being expressed openly and also probably reinforces a 'them' and 'us' mode.

A few cases give us an insight. The vocational training network is based on actors working on different sites and in different managements. Its main role is to implement vocational training and to monitor these actions with a view to their evaluation. The information gathered is transmitted to the vocational training department which, in turn,

consolidates the evaluation and works out the general policy. To this end, each member of the network contributes to a database. Now, the latter is never informed in real time mainly because, parallel to the 'official' tool, the actors use 'clandestine' tools. There is thus a time-lag which is sometimes considerable, between the point at which the training takes place and the point at which it is actually accounted. Not only do these practices contravene the formal organisation of the network, but they also explicitly render the centre dependent on its periphery and ensure the latter considerable autonomy. One of the members of the network explained: "The department of studies and training will never have the real information because not everybody enters everything into their software base. We can set up training courses in December, but implement them in January, therefore they are paid in January, after the accounts have been closed. This training has taken place, it will never appear in the accounts, it will not appear anywhere because a year cannot begin with a deficit, with remainders from the previous year. Therefore we enter what we like into the software base. The central department never has the same vision as us. The only legal base is their software. The base that I use is illegal but it is more complete and I only use that one. What's more that's the one I send to my bosses.¹⁰ So they cover me, while at the same time they know that this base cannot be transmitted to the central department."

In another register, we find that the technicians' evaluation practices vary depending on the departments and the services. The probability of acceding to the status of senior technician thus varies depending on the department and faithfully reproduces their symbolic hierarchy and their prestige. A technician working in the technical department has more legitimacy to attain this level than a technician in the quality department and still more than his counterpart in the production department. Furthermore, within each entity, differences exist which lead to a split in practices. Some services or departments have worked out evaluation scales, others have not, and, finally, each world has its own methods of absence of method for managing the careers of the technicians. "To reach a specific coefficient, a good level of expertise is required on at least two criteria, but they are my own criteria". This statement could be made by numerous team leaders or heads of department. The same goes for the fixing of aims, when those in charge discuss them in terms of what they prescribe: "I fix the aims. We have to fix the most realistic aims possible... Well, the aims that I fix are

¹⁰ The training department has no hierarchical link with the members of the network who are attached to other departments and services depending on the sites where they work.

more like progress actions. And then, I must admit that I do not always take their achievement into consideration”.

All these cases, by revealing the variety of practices and ways of doing things, also convey a desire to preserve a working space, autonomy in methods of management and of decision and ways of avoiding the gaze of others. Sometimes, as in the case of the vocational training network, the assertion of independence is explicit and the actors act knowingly. In other instances, this practice is probably the consequence of the isolation and lack of coordination of the actors. But in all instances the actors reveal themselves as ambiguous. They complain of the absence of coordination of practices, of their isolation and adopt exit strategies in a fit of pique. They are also very insistent on conserving their domain of activity and their know-how. They protect themselves against the intrusion of another service or another entity, perceived in these cases as always potentially threatening and they then adopt these rationales with a more strategic concern in mind.

Hindering implementation

The fourth form of action in many respects resembles the previous one and there is nothing to indicate that the actors recognise it as a formal challenge. *A priori*, the difference between these two levels of action is minimal. Nevertheless, and as a few examples will endeavour to illustrate, it does appear to be interesting to isolate it *per se* and to assert its collective and challenging scope. Behind the rationale of hindering implementation, we find in reality numerous actions which, through various and sometimes non-intentional mechanisms, gradually and insidiously cause the machine to seize up, that is to say render unlikely the implementation of one decision or another. As in the previous case, in the first instance what can be observed are rationales of resistance: the actors go slow in using certain tools for example. But, while there is probably a desire to preserve autonomy and one's room for manoeuvre, the consequence is that these practices contribute either to the capsizing of projects or to their delay. While the first form of collective action resembles going slow, it assumes here an aspect of sabotage in the sense that it leads to a series of consequences which are sometimes important. However, and it is probably this aspect which is indicative of its specificity, the actors cannot officially and openly claim to adhere to this form of action. Unlike the desire to express one's opinion, where the actors endeavour to assert their point of view publicly, this is not really possible here.

The first case concerns one of the production sites. Like all the other establishments, in the context of a policy aimed at ‘focussing on the core of the job’, it had to reduce the number of employees. The head of human resources on this site announced, during a meeting, that he had almost achieved his targets. Now in reality only 60% of the target was achieved. To justify this gap, the head of human resources explained that the target was unrealistic and that the reduction did not correspond to the real requirements of the site. Furthermore, he recalled that the site had a very strong tradition of autonomy: the head of human resources added that this signified that while “people do respect the targets which they themselves fix, they feel less concerned by the targets imposed from without”, in this instance by the holding company. The second case, very similar to the previous one, once again saw the site at odds with the general management. In the context of a revision of the management of human resources, it was intended to review completely the divisions and to give priority to management at the expense of the establishments. This rationale meant that each major management would have a human resources structure headed by a person in charge. This decision came from general management and, within a few weeks, the director of human resources started to make the nominations. The production department is divided almost equally between two sites, thus, in parallel to the nomination of a human resources manager for this department, one of the two sites commenced the nomination of a new human resources director uniquely for the establishment.

Here we have two cases, therefore, where each of the sites began by advancing their intense desire to preserve their autonomy. But these two cases go further than simply wishing to preserve room for manoeuvre. In the two situations, in reality it is the company’s policy which is challenged and seriously undermined. In the first case, the site refused the reduction in the aims demanded of it and which constituted one of the major axes of the company’s policy. In the second case, the policy of human resources was weakened and, further, an approach intended to structure the firms around management and no longer around establishments.

A third case also deserves our consideration. Here it is a question of career management. Formally, for the employees, the company gives preference to individualised rewards based on merit and performance; in addition to this first requirement there is one based on the constitution of quotas. The number of awards is therefore limited and fixed in advance. Those in charge, at all levels of intervention, therefore find themselves confronted with a special situation in which the number of promotions is almost always inferior to the number of candidates. To compensate for this gap, a completely different logic is insidiously

set up, re-instating length of time in employment but taken here in a different meaning, that of the place of the individual in a queue. In situations where competence, attitude, involvement and performance are practically equivalent, the reward will be given to the person who has been waiting the longest. “When a promotion is possible, I look at what people have done. I make a list and then I look at when each person had their last rise in salary or promotion. I give preference to the person at the back of the queue. So we manage a calendar. When people have a similar profile it is the one who has been waiting longest who will be promoted”, explained one of the buyers. Another said: “Competence is not wholly recognised. When you manage a team, there are quotas. I have 30 people in my team; we have a quota of 13% which means there are only three promotions possible in the year. Therefore that means one promotion every ten years”. Another person said: “The question we ask is: ‘When did this person get their last increase in salary?’ Three years ago. What about the others? Well, they get their salary raises in their turn. Once they have had a rise they know, depending on the size of the department, that they will have to wait several years; everyone knows this.” Finally: “In any case, the first rise depends on competence. Thereafter, it’s true that I make myself a calendar for the increases.”

In this last instance, the actors confront the incoherencies of the management of their careers and, more generally speaking, the impossibility in which they find themselves to carry out a real evaluation of their work. Despite themselves, they re-introduce a principle which they have difficulty in defending since they tend on the whole to favour the principle of merit. This return to length of service, taken here in the narrow meaning of time in the queue, also enables part of the uncertainty concerning the management of their careers to be raised. The proofs of recognition of work are indeed particularly opaque and fluctuating, the management of the calendars in function of the place of the employee in the queue thus affords the possibility of finally making the reward system fairly predictable. As can be seen, at the outset, the actors are not diametrically opposed to this form of career management. However, not succeeding in implementing it and faced with the multiple uncertainties to which they are confronted they opt for a hybrid system, which is unsatisfactory but which does offer a degree of predictability. By so doing, these same actors turn even further away from the initial system making it increasingly inconsistent.

This form of action is therefore of a fairly special nature because it is probable that in many situations it is part of an unconscious form of behaviour. In the first two cases set out here, the actors probably wish, and consciously, to preserve their room for manoeuvre, but do not formally have the intention of almost totally ruining the policy at the origin of the project.

The third case is even more explicit. The actors, either because they come up against the incoherencies of the organisation, or because they wish to slow down part of the initiatives, succeed in sabotaging the organisation and in ruining part of the projects. What this form of action then highlights, is that, indirectly, it forces the firm to constantly revise their principles of organisation, to rethink its arrangements and to continually launch projects. In short, it profoundly destabilises the firm without being attributable to identifiable actors for all that, because its characteristic is the undefined nature of the actors since none of them proclaims loudly and clearly their intention of circumventing the rules in order to weaken them.

Asserting a commitment to work

In the face of the new production model and in a context of globalisation, action is profoundly ambivalent. Employees will rush into the various openings afforded by the way in which the work is organised in order to commit themselves to complete their work. The activity is as much the outcome of a task of interpretation as of the simple application of instructions and procedures, which pre-supposes that the employees take initiatives, innovate, invent ways of doing things, and, in short, that they make an effort and mobilise numerous resources to successfully carry out their projects and achieve their aims. They thus demand room for manoeuvre and self-investment which they present as being what makes their work interesting and exciting. It is to a great extent this capacity to act, to be able despite everything to do things, which they evoke as giving pleasure to the accomplishment of their work, overcoming obstacles, finding solutions, etc.

The action is therefore distinctly ambiguous and it is very often in the light of this aspect that work is frequently defined as alienating since it requires, to be carried out, an ever-increasing investment of one's own person. By asserting their capacity to act despite everything, the employees become their own taskmaster by assuming and by seeking – despite all the obstacles they encounter such as deadlines, budget, teams – the means of succeeding and sometimes even of going beyond the original objectives. This rationale therefore appears *a priori* to be antinomial to any kind of active resistance or challenge and, on the contrary, denotes a type of subjection. Nevertheless it should be understood not only in these terms but as a positive way for employees to sustain their activity. It is indeed very often in the name of work that the actors develop the strategies presented above. Disagreements are made in the name of work, in the name of a conception of this slightly out-dated form known as satisfaction with a job well done and it is because they come up against the incoherencies

of the organisation of their work, because this organisation too frequently appears as a hindrance to doing the job that the employees become involved in these multiple, uncertain and often modest forms of resistance.

* * *

The various forms of action described here do not claim to cover the whole domain of protest. Many types are not mentioned, in particular those which are most expected like strikes, demonstrations or involvement in trade-unions. The actions here remain within a specific sphere, that of work. One of the questions posed in this context concerns the nature of their status. The ambivalence and ambiguity of these forms of behaviour is obvious. Some may appear eminently marginal as they are extremely discreet, if not invisible. Others appear to be incongruous because they seem to correspond to a very low level of awareness of the action and to be lacking in this sense only, *a priori*, intentionality. It would appear however that the existence and resonance of such forms of behaviour are far from negligible. Our hypothesis is that they are the outcome of a vicious circle in that, while they may not confront the organisation of work directly and knowingly, they do put a spoke in the wheels. They engender a principle of self-perpetuation: the organisation of work, by its incoherencies, gives rise to forms of protest – individual or collective, withdrawal or voicing of opinions – which cause the system to seize up in part and, by so doing, leads to other forms of discontent, thus constantly forcing the organisation to endeavour to adjust and to correct its orientations. These rationales may be voiceless and discreet but they are not without effect even though they are not expressed on any institutionalised stage.